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This too is writing: Writing in the holistic classroom

Iris Anne Tramp

THIS TOO IS WRITING: WRITING IN THE HOLISTIC CLASSROOM

A Project

Presented to the

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this paper is to compare the effects on students of a conventional versus a holistic writing curriculum. The writer contends that a conventional writing curriculum emphasizes the mechanics of writing, has the teacher in control of the writing process, and sees the students as empty vessels waiting to be filled (Atwell, 1980). A holistic writing curriculum emphasizes content, has the students in control of the writing process, respecting the knowledge and stories the students possess.

Understanding the function of the brain in relation to learning (Hart, 1983), regard for individual learning profiles (Dunn, 1992), respect and celebration of diversity, and knowledge of developmental stages are all elements of a holistic writing curriculum.

As writing is one of our communication systems, the paper emphasizes the social aspects of writing. The political implications of students developing personal voice through writing and collaboration are discussed (Freire, 1972).

The role of teachers as fellow learners and facilitators of learning is integrated throughout the paper. As whole language is the philosophy that most exactly fits the parameters of a holistic writing curriculum, it is the model referred to most frequently (Newman, 1990). In this

as the students express need (Dyson, 1989).

The paper concludes with a writing handbook for teachers in which the writer shares personal experiences from the classroom. The handbook is an invitation for teachers to consider a holistic perspective on writing, establish environments that nurture emergent writers, and develop classroom communities that encourage multiculturism through a collaborative writing process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To Richard who was always there to encourage me.

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INTRODUCTION

In reviewing the literature related to a writing curriculum, it is apparent there are several issues to be discussed. These issues include: comparison between a conventional writing curriculum and a holistic writing curriculum, the political and social aspects of writing, the whole language model in a holistic writing curriculum, the function of the brain in learning, the individual learning profiles of students, the developmental stages of writing, and the role of teachers in the writing classroom.

The social and political issues involved in a writing curriculum are important in our increasingly multicultural society as the need for tolerance, understanding, and celebration of diversity is escalating. Debbie Dewitt's (1994) research has shown that emotional and cognitive support makes it possible for students to reflectively think about and change existing beliefs. Jaime Wurzel (1988) submits that becoming aware of and incorporating the different systems of cultural knowledge into one's own system of knowledge is the beginning of internalizing multiculturalism. Dewitt maintains this is the way society will transcend racism and prejudice. A natural place for this to begin is in the writing classroom. Students learn

that we are more alike than different when they share their writing with their peers, work in collaborative groups, and engage in community building activities. Participation in such classroom communities leads students to value their individuality and diversity. Students in classrooms that celebrate diversity are encouraged to write on their own topics and share texts. This begins the process of developing "voice" and becoming more aware of themselves and others as persons.

Teachers who value what students write more than how they write are providing a tool for them to express their innermost thoughts. These teachers are aware of the need for students to develop authentic voice, to be "free" to express themselves and their culture, to have a personal investment in their own learning, to have a sense of community within the classroom; thus, begins the process of validation. If individuals are not validated, made to feel important and valued as individuals, they think they have no voice in society, and see no hope of change, becoming ever more disenfranchised and hostile.

In contrast, conventional classrooms support the view that it is imperative to control the curriculum, the environment, and the students. Teachers attempt to control the topic, the handwriting, the style, the very thought that goes into a written text. The idea that students have many stories to tell and much to write about from the day they

The philosophy of whole language most exactly fits the needs of writers (Newman, 1990) because its fundamental assumptions are that learning is social, requires risk-taking and experimentation and involves constructing meaning. In Tucson, Arizona, several groups, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, are considering adopting whole language as an official language policy because it is the only approach to reading and writing that does not deny children their culture. Whole language writing curriculum addresses the inner and outer world of children (Harste, 1989).

Whole language is an attitude, a way of looking at children and the learning process. Whole language teachers are learners who are always observing what works and what does not work in easing the learning process and want to know what is happening to/with the learners (Harste, 1989): What have they learned? How are they different now that they have finished reading a particular text? What have they learned from writing? How did they organize their thinking and clarify what they wanted to write?

Whole language teachers believe that learning occurs when learners are actively involved, when learning has real purposes, when the learner makes choices and shares in decision-making, when the learner uses language, mathematics, art, music, drama and other communication systems as vehicles for exploration. Dyson (1982) asserts

that children through their own actions will establish connections between reading, writing, and language. Perspectives on a writing curriculum continue to evolve and change from an emphasis on penmanship, spelling correctly, and displaying competence in the conventions of language. Newer perspectives see writing as more than penmanship and conventions. Writing is making sense of the world by sharing thoughts, schema, and visions.

To develop a writing curriculum, it is necessary to enter the world of the child. It requires comprehension of the social significance of writing, a knowledge of how humans learn, and insight about the role of teachers in writing classrooms.

Children view writing as they regard talking or drawing. During early childhood years, children become fluent and inventive users of symbols: gestures, pictures, spoken words, and written ones (Dyson, 1990). Vygotsy (1978) warns us that "written language must be cultivated rather than imposed or the child's activity will not be manifest in his writing and his budding personality will not grow" (p. 60).

When children reach the formality of the classroom, many discover, according to convention, they cannot write. Until now they had thought their scribbling was writing and who is to say it is not? If scribbled text has meaning for the writers, then it is written text. Children are not

concerned about their text having meaning for others since it has meaning for themselves. Over time, they realize what they write can have meaning for others.

In whole language writing programs children get in touch with and share their own thoughts and schema with others through writing. Children develop language through interaction. Harste (1989) insists that schools are not here to silence students. Children learn to talk by talking to someone who responds; they learn to write by writing to someone who responds (Fox, 1988).

Social interaction is critical for children if they are to see new uses for writing; the informality of whole language classrooms makes this important part of learning natural. Experiencing the schema of other children provides new perspectives and widens children's viewpoints. Trying out their "text" on their friends and listening to their friends' "text" provides important talk for the young writers. It allows them to step outside their own views of reality and look at their work through the eyes and ears of others.

It is through interaction with other young writers that children realize the need for the conventions of writing. Dyson (1989) says that children's compositions change when they begin to sense new possibilities. Whole language teachers are confident in the belief the necessary attention to conventions will follow when students recognize the need

to have peers understand what has been written. The teachers are sensitive and alert to when this need becomes important to a student or group of students and are prepared to offer the necessary guidance.

When whole language teachers provide students with environments that are accepting and nurturing, they are allowed to explore and express their own thoughts and schema. Those teachers are giving their students the freedom to validate their own thoughts, to celebrate their diversity, to be proud of their racial, religious, and cultural heritage, to develop their own voices.

In Dialectic of Freedom, Greene (1988) suggests that freedom is not experienced without permission. Encouraging young children to experience the schema of other children and to have their own schema validated is an emancipating way to begin their formal education. The younger the children are at the time they are validated and given permission to be free, the more empowered they are. This is what Freire did (1970) when he gave the Brazilian peasants permission, through developing their literacy, to question the world in which they lived.

To become writers, children have to bring their way of experiencing their symbolic and social worlds into their text so that their "voices" are heard. Developing their own voice, which is obtained at the place where "thoughts and speech unite" (Vygotsky, 1977, p. 78), is what emancipates

the writer. The task of the writer is to translate thought (inner speech) into written speech.

Whole language teachers arrange occasions that lead students to define their connections and relationships. Caine & Caine (1991) assert that teachers must "relax their control, to provide for individual differences and intrinsic motivation"(p. 123). Letting go of control means to move from teacher-driven curriculum to student-driven curriculum.

When the diversity of children in today's classroom is considered, these definitions and descriptions of writing have enormous ramifications. Because expectations and behavior differ from community to community and from culture to culture, the complexity of the multicultural classroom presents extraordinary opportunities for teachers to model acceptance and celebration of diversity while providing opportunities in the classroom that contribute to community-building.

In whole language classrooms, students are encouraged to write and speak more about themselves, to recognize their individuality and to celebrate their diversity. The teachers develop writing assignments that help students get to know themselves better. Students receive the wonderful gift of time - time to be ready for conventional communication, time to develop their own voice, time to develop their ideas, time to share their text with other writers.

A handbook reflecting a holistic perspective of writing has been written as an invitation to teachers to experience another way to view the writing curriculum. It shares a writing program that allows children the freedom to choose their own writing topics, provides them time to think, collaborate, and revise with instruction in the conventions of language provided at the point children express a need.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

A large body of literature supports the writer's beliefs about a writing curriculum, with recognition that individual philosophy affects views on writing. Appreciation that each student is a mosaic of emotional, social, environmental, psychological, and physiological elements and will respond to learning individually, is the foundation of the writer's convictions about writing. Review of the literature supports the view there is a compelling need to take a holistic position toward teaching, the curriculum, and the learner.

Theodore Sizer believes that there is a "profound and widespread disrespect for children, most visible seen in ineffective schools" (Sizer, 1994, p. 20). The consequences of this attitude toward our students are profound; Sizer blames the violence in our schools on this attitude. Respecting students as individuals involves consideration for their personal learning profiles and regard for their individual social perspectives. There are many children who have, within the conditions of conventional schooling, decided that it is not worth writing or speaking thoughtfully because they do not believe that they will be heard (Simon, 1987).

Holistic teachers recognize that what is often labeled

as a "learning disorder" is more often a "teaching disorder." When a student is not learning, the teachers consider all the factors involved in that student's learning profile and restructure the environment appropriately; this modification usually eliminates what appeared to be a learning disorder.

In contrast, in the conventional model of education, when a student is not learning, the assumption is that the student is limited in some way. The conventional position on education views the role of teachers as founts of information, guardians of control (of both the classroom and curriculum), and preservers of social dogma. The students are regarded as empty vessels to be filled and threats to the prevailing institutions if they are not indoctrinated. Curriculums are courses of study that meet the needs of the power group of society. Roger Simon (1987) challenges teachers to encourage discussions of controversial issues and nontraditional points of view. Confronting personal definitions of writing is a first step in helping teachers develop a writing curriculum.

DEFINING WRITING

Defining writing requires an inquiry within to detect personal perspective. The teachers in the Booth Bay Writing Project (1980) did this when they looked at their writing histories. Most of them remembered writing as a "losing

battle with mechanics"(p. 52). One teacher asked, "What did diagraming a sentence have to do with my ability to express my thoughts?" (p.52) Another remembered, "all of my school experiences with writing emphasized the same things: perfect paragraphing, perfect punctuation, perfect capitalization, perfect handwriting, and perfect results. No one allowed me or challenged me to be concerned with what I said. This overwhelming concern for the technically correct finished product is still with me today" (p. 52).

Their personal histories revealed when they wrote, they wrote for teachers. Alan Burgess spoke for most of the teachers when he concluded:

> I see that teachers taught me the structure of the English language but did not teach me how to write. Teachers assigned writing topics, but I did not learn how to write. Teachers encouraged me to imitate other writers, and I learned how to imitate. Teachers were too critical, and I learned to dislike writing. When a teacher was interested I what I had to say, I began to write (Atwell, 1985, pp.52).

In the conventional writing model, even the word "I" was to be stricken out as if stating an idea or opinion of one's own was somehow inappropriate.

If learning to write through the conventional writing model is difficult for the mainstream student, consider how much more difficult it is for the culturally different child, the child whose primary language is other than English, the child whose way of processing information differs from the norm, the transient child.

In his work with children of the barrios in Southern California and with veterans, Mike Rose (1989) found their writing was a "source of embarrassment, a halting, self-conscious duty that resulted in stunted, error-ridden prose" (p. 180). The writing programs Rose was provided with assumed that:

> error can be eradicated by zeroing in on the particulars of language. That assumption seems to rest on a further assumption that grammatical error signals some fundamental mental barrier to engaging in higher-level cognitive pursuits; until error is isolated and cleaned up, it will not be possible for students to read and write critically, study literature, or toy with style (p. 141).

Rose speculated that "concentrating on the particulars of language - schoolbook grammar, mechanics, usage would tremendously restrict the scope of what language use was all about. Such approaches would rob writing of its joy" (p. 141). To teach writing as a curriculum of language conventions is putting control of the writing process into the teacher's hands and assuring failure for the students.

Writing is a disciplined way of thinking, a communication from mind to mind (Murray, 1989). Writing is sharing a vision, a dream, a personal schema. Writing is forcing yourself to look inside your mind and acknowledge who you are. Writing is using words and sentences and paragraphs to affect an audience. Reddy (1979) suggests that contemporary people have a magical notion about how people communicate with each other. He conjectures a

'conduit' that carries pictures/ideas/stories from one person's head to another's. In actuality, each person has to reconstruct their way of perceiving to accommodate the other person's schema. Murray (1983) asserts that regarding writing only as communication is to diminish it as a craft. Teachers are determining factors in children seeing writing as a tool to use for authentic purposes.

ROLE OF TEACHERS IN HOLISTIC CLASSROOMS

In holistic classrooms teachers are fellow learners and facilitators of learning. The teachers know how children learn to write and what children require if they are to be successful in writing. An appreciation of the social and moral implications of students developing a sense of self through writing and collaboration with their peers is held by the teachers. Holistic teachers view classrooms as communities of learners that are developing communication skills, social skills, and sharing individual perspectives.

When Emig (1982) looked at the "magical thinking" paradigm about writing representing the current writing model in American schools, she found the prevailing model differed significantly from the whole language model (see table 1). The "magical thinking" Emig was referring to was the transfer of information that takes place when teachers tell students what they need to know.

TABLE 1
Differences in Writing Models

Traditional Models	Whole Language Models
Writing is taught rather than learned.	Writing is learned rather than taught.
Children must be taught to write from parts to whole.	Writers of all ages usually work from wholes to parts.
There is one process of writing that serves all writers for all their aims, modes, intents, and audiences.	There is no monolithic process of writing. There are processes of writing that differ because of aim, intent, mode, and audience.
The writing process is linear; all planning precedes writing, as all writing precedes all revising.	The processes of writing do not proceed in a linear sequence, but are recursive.
The process of writing is almost exclusively conscious.	Writing is as often an unconscious roaming as it is a planned and conscious rendering of information and events.
There is no community or collaboration in writing; it is exclusively a silent and solitary activity.	The process of writing can be enhanced by working in and with a group of other writers.

The teachers in the Booth Bay Writing Project (Atwell, 1985) used the information from their own experiences and from the work of Graves, Calkins, Sowers, and Giacobbe to develop the tenets of their writing curriculum:

- Writers need time to think, write, confer, write, read, write, change their minds, and write some more.
- Writers need time they can count on, so even when

they are not writing, they are anticipating the time they will be.

- Writers need time to write well.
- Writers need their own topics. If writing is to be more than an exercise or a battle with conventions, right from the first day of kindergarten students should use writing as a way to think about and give shape to their own ideas and concerns.
- The danger of school literacy tasks is that they increase children's sensitivity to accomplishing the teacher's intentions rather than their own.
- Writers need response. Helpful response comes during - not after - the composing. It comes from the writer's peers and from the teacher, who consistently model the thoughtful, appropriate restatements and questions that help writers reflect on and rethink the content of their writing.
- Writers learn mechanics in context from teachers who address errors as they occur within individual pieces of writing, where these rules and forms will have meaning.
- Children need to know adults who write. If we write, share our writing with our students, and show what experienced writers do while

composing, letting our students see our own drafts in all their messiness and tentativeness, we model the writing process for them.

- Writers need to read. They need access to a wide-ranging variety of texts that are self-selected and regular chunks of time set aside to read them.
- Writing teachers who take responsibility for their knowledge and teaching, will seek out professional resources and request courses that reflect the important and far-reaching conclusions of recent research into children's writing. They will become writers and researchers, observing and learning from their own and their students' writing.

Appreciating the writer's needs, teachers can design classrooms and curriculum that simplify the acquisition of writing for their students. Teachers who recognize the social aspects of writing will use it by community-building and encouraging collaboration between student writers.

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF WRITING

The consensus of our legislators, business community, and parents, is that our present education system is not effective. Shor (1987) believes that the mechanical, authoritarian remedies offered by the many task forces, commissions, and state and national legislators will not solve modern education's problems. He suggests the methods

suggested by such educational leaders as Paulo Freire offer more hopeful solutions.

Concerning writing, Freire (1972) emphasizes the need to view one's world critically, to distinguish culture from nature and to recognize individual ability to change culture. Freire (1972) sees the naive person as having an unreflected acceptance of the fixed and inevitability of the world and one's own views. Unreflecting thinkers cannot conceive of a basic position different from their own.

The social profiles of today's students reflect the development of our multicultural society. There is a large body of literature to support the writer's stance on the pressing need to address the significance of the writing curriculum in advancing tolerance and celebration of diversity, a social imperative in our increasingly multicultural society. Writing programs that respect the students' personal history, help the development of individual voice, and build community through peer collaboration, will break down the spurious racial, cultural, and ethnic barriers while developing culturally sensitive students.

Writing is about power. Those who write best have the most power and therefore have the most control over our lives. Fox (1988) asserts that power is being able to craft a piece of writing so effectively that its purpose is achieved. She says that "the granting of this power to our

children is politically and socially essential" (p.52).

Writing is about voice. Students in whole language classrooms who write in a safe, nurturing environments and select their own topics for writing, begin to get in touch with their own schema. These children are emancipated when they experience the schema of other children and have their own schema validated through collaboration with their peers. As they work in collaboration with other young writers, they begin to realize the power of their own ideas. Murray (1983) claims that:

> The majority of people are not allowed to write. Some are censored by those authorities who fear the power of people writing. We censor ourselves and others by fear of what may be said and we censor by not believing that those not like us have anything worth saying and the language with which to say it. Those who come from another class in our very highly classed society, those who think or feel or behave or know differently, are not encouraged to write. They are not taught. They are not believed in and no one listens to them. Untaught by teachers, almost all our children come to school with our language and their own way of using it (p. 30).

Writing is part of being literate and literacy is about altered social relationships. Once people can read and write, their social standing is permanently altered - people cannot treat them the way they did when they were illiterate (Harste, 1989). Freire (1970) knew this when he taught the peasants in Brazil to read with questioning minds. Rose (1989) touched on it when he said:

> It is an astounding challenge: the complex and wrenching struggle to actualize the potential not only of the privileged but, of those who have lived here for

> a long time generating a culture outside the mainstream and those who immigrated with cultural traditions of their own (p.225).

A fundamental element in young writers generating their voice is collaboration. Dyson (1987) addressed the question of children talking in the classroom. The conventional view is that when children are talking, laughing, teasing, correcting, they are "off-task". Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) in writing of her experiences teaching Maori children, explained her feelings about:

> the unseemly and unlawful communication. If only they'd stop talking to each other, playing with each other, fighting with each other and loving each other . . . I harness the communication, since I can't control it. Between them all the time is togetherness, so that learning is so mixed up with relationship that it becomes part of it . . . (p. 43).

Researchers are taking a new look at the merit of social interaction within the framework of learning. Dyson maintains if children are given tasks worth talking about and the right to talk, their interactions can contribute substantially to literacy development. Cazden (1986) found that peer talk was constructive for socio-linguistic and cognitive development. This talk allows students to appropriate conversational roles usually not open to them in conversations with the teacher. With their contemporaries, students are more apt to explain or contest ideas through questions, to make suggestions or to explain ideas to less-informed others (Forman, 1985).

Dyson (1989) defines learning to write as learning to

negotiate boundaries among multiple worlds. Humans have complex mental worlds that vary greatly from person to person, resulting in various views of reality. Whitehead (1989) suggests three constructs that define our reality: (1) enduring objects (personalities, people, culture, societies), (2) complex dynamic communities of people/things, and (3) occasions that are constantly rearranging themselves.

When children share their inner worlds (ideas, thoughts, visions, schema) through conversations or writing with other children, contradictions between individual perspectives of reality surface which promotes reflective behavior. The students not only help each other extend and elaborate their worlds, they critique those worlds. The children become an immediate audience for each other. Dyson (1987) in her two-year observation of first and second grade children at work, found that:

- The existence of a peer group during writing tasks provides an audience whose opinion matters.
- Peers are a potent resource to aid individual reflection.
- When children collaborate/converse during writing they enter into and help construct the actions of each other's imaginary worlds and even provide the feelings, thoughts, and motives of characters.
- Through their interactions with each other,

children collaboratively and spontaneously accomplish tasks that often are considered "over their heads."

- The more elaborate verbal stories and the most flexible manipulation of narrative time and space occur, not in the texts themselves, but in the children's talk.

Children's academic accomplishments can be influenced by their relationships with each other as well as with the teachers. Classrooms that provide for the interaction of students facilitate learning and produce opportunities for emergence of multiple voices. The talk that follows makes possible new knowledge that expands individual experience and gives vision to new realities. Climates that suppress all but one voice impede the process of education (Simon, 1987). Through talking and writing about common experiences, students become a group cooperatively engrossed in deliberation and hopefully gain greater control of their individual lives.

During a research project with American college students, Findaly and Faith (1987) realized the consequences of students not acquiring a voice, not writing about themselves, not recognizing their individuality or celebrating their diversity. Their students did not believe that language could be a primary means for examining their own thoughts, that it might be a tool for self-knowledge and

thoughts and feelings for building

students admitted to being able to "crank

hat fulfilled a specific assignment, but

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reflect my thought, what does it

write is a process. Researchers have explored and defined the stages of this process to help explain the developmental stages of writing. As writing is a social activity, so the developmental stages take place in social settings.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF WRITING

Another facet to developing a writing program is understanding how a learner learns to write. The pathway to literacy begins at home with children hearing spoken language. Educating parents, child care workers, and preschool teachers about the importance of developing oral language helps the success of children as they move toward formal schooling. Holistic teachers in preschool and primary classrooms provide many rich opportunities and occasions for using oral language knowing this is

foundation for future writing.

Appreciating communication efforts involved in early artwork encourages this early mode of communication. Over time drawings emerge into pictures that become recognizable; soon their artwork includes print-like marks and symbols, children's names, random letters, and then some beginning sounds of words. Vygostsky (1934) maintained that "a child's gesture is the initial visual sign that contains the child's future writing as an acorn contains a future oak" (p. 56). He regarded the child's first marks on paper developmentally as recorded gestures.

As emerging writing begins to include those sounds they have heard and written, it becomes apparent children spontaneously figure out the conventions of writing. In their own way, they invent the rules of spelling and writing. In their earliest writing, children do not precisely encode meaning, but, as in their first drawings, it is the act itself - the gesture and any accompanying talk - that makes the writing meaningful. Over time, talk about stories and experiences becomes increasingly more sophisticated (Dyson, 1990).

The key to writing development is not what is written on the page, but what children are trying to accomplish in the world beyond the page. Within any one task, children draw on their developing knowledge in diverse ways. Because of this variation, there can be no definition of how young

children write. Newkirk (1985) relates that in Graves' two-year longitudinal study of children in grades one to four, he found no fixed sequence in developmental stages of writing. Harste (1984) also rejected the notion that there is a fixed order to the kinds of writing children attempt.

Stine (1980) who studied early literacy behavior of preschoolers, found writing to be the most popular beginning reading activity. She reported that children appear to initially explore writing by making letter-like forms. From there, they moved to an interest in searching for the correct letters to write special words, particularly names; they did this by copying print in the environment and by asking questions.

Clay (1975) focused primarily on children's earliest exploring of the perceptual features of print. She emphasized that in writing, children's attention is directed to the visual details of print, thus providing a valuable complement to early reading.

The environments of holistic primary classrooms are arranged to encourage children to play as they work. Social interaction takes place through symbolic media besides writing: imaginative play, narrative and dramatic talk and drawing. Caine & Caine (1991) stress the importance of not neglecting the element of playfulness as "creativity, connectedness, and spontaneity are frequently light and playful in nature" (p. 124). Whole language teachers know

becoming a writer begins with children interacting with and experiencing language through play, conversation, electronic media, songs and literature. If writing is taken too earnestly, the students may "downshift", affecting their ability to write (Hart. 1983).

Adler (1927) said, "Games are not to be considered as haphazard ideas of parents or educators, but as educational aids and as stimuli for the spirit, for the fantasy, and for the life-technique of the child" (p. 101). Bruner (1966) believed that games help get children involved in understanding language and social organization. Piaget (1962) stressed the importance of play in developing representational thought.

Through play, children assimilate new information and consolidate it with experience. Vygotsky (1966) theorized that play allows a child to exceed the bounds of the immediate stimulus and to learn to use symbolic, abstract levels of thought. Christie and Johnson (1983) have shown that free-play activities are valuable in promoting literacy development. Pellegrini (1980) noted relationships between kindergartners' levels of play and their emergence into reading, writing, and language.

Holistic teachers are aware that when children are playing, they are coping with the tasks of life by role playing, fantasizing, and experimenting with their environment. Opportunities to continue this method of

making sense of their world can be provided in the classroom. Langer (1967) asserts that in their play, children transform emotionally significant experiences to express and interpret them, to give form to their inner worlds. Dyson (1990) says that:

> Play is a 'canvas' in which young children can symbolize ideas and feelings through gestures and speech. As children grow as symbolic players and social beings, they paint the canvas of play collaboratively with their friends (p. 54).

As children are seen as complex individuals who are doing important life tasks as they play, understanding the role the brain plays during learning becomes of interest.

BRAIN COMPATIBLE LEARNING

Research by neuroscientists and neurobiologists on how the brain functions (Hart, 1983) and how learning takes place has provided the knowledge needed to develop programs that speed up learning. Whole language philosophy embraces convictions that are brain-compatible: students experience authentic writing that relates to their real world about which they already have many brain patterns in place; the importance of nurturing, safe learning environments to encourage learning is emphasized; the presentation of learning in undiluted or uncontrolled real texts, which is consistent with the brain research that reveals that the brain functions better with large, complex patterns than with small, discrete pieces of information.

Brain-compatible learning theory also addresses the impact of the emotions on learning. When students perceive threats associated with a learning task, the related stress causes a change in brain chemicals affecting ability to learn. Because it is impossible to isolate the cognitive (thinking) from the affective (feeling) domain, teachers need to understand that students' feelings and attitudes will be involved in learning. Learning is influenced by emotions and mind sets based on expectancy, personal biases and prejudices, degree of self-esteem, and the need for social interaction. Every aspect of students' lives, including community, family, and technology affects their learning (Hart, 1983).

With recognition of the brain-based theory, the educational community has the information necessary to design settings and methods that will facilitate learning. A 1979 yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development said that schooling is a poor facilitator of learning and that although much is known about the learning processes, there is little evidence of this knowledge in the classrooms. The author asserts that, in ignoring individual differences, the system is not making use of brain research findings.

LEARNING STYLES

Developing a holistic ideology about students and

writing means addressing not only the cognitive and affective domains, the biological, physiological, and social profiles of each student must be considered.

Taking a holistic perspective toward teaching and learning includes respecting children as individuals and valuing their differences. This involves discernment of their individual learning profiles, biological and developmental sets of personal characteristics, and knowledge of what simplifies learning.

Research done on individual styles of learning has provided information about the individual factors that influence learning. Holistic perspectives of teaching allow for the emotional, social, environmental, physiological, and psychological profiles of each student. Caine & Caine (1991) assert that "although we have the same set of systems, including our senses and basic emotions, they are integrated differently in every brain" (p.87). Further, "because learning actually changes the structure of the brain, the more we learn, the more unique we become" (p.87). The research on learning styles shows differences in style among members of the same class, culture, community, profession, socioeconomic groups and even within families.

Learning styles research (Dunn, 1992) has revealed that because of biological factors, each person is affected differently by environmental elements: sound, light, temperature and design. There are also individual reactions

to emotional elements: motivation, persistence, responsibility and individual need for structure or choice. The sociological elements that come into play include preference to learn alone or with others. There are also physical variables to consider: perceptual strengths, food intake, time of day or night, energy levels, and the need for mobility.

These variables affect the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, absorb and retain new and difficult information. For the analytical student who succeeds in a writing curriculum that emphasizes correctness and conforming to convention, a conventional writing curriculum is comfortable; the global learner will struggle against the reductionist model, but neither will experience the freedom to explore, discover, and share unique and singular ideas as they would in a whole language model.

In whole language classrooms, language is kept whole and children are involved in using it functionally and purposefully to meet their own needs. The needs of global learners, by far most of young children, are well-met in a whole language classroom. The emphasis on writing, drama, art, music, and dance in whole language classrooms provides learning opportunities for children in each modality. The environments of whole language classrooms match the learning preferences of many emergent writers and teachers are usually flexible enough to provide multifaceted teaching to

adapt to visual, tactile, emotional, and auditory preferences to meet the individual needs of children.

Reflecting on his school years, Donald Murray (1983) writes:

> I did badly in school, in part because I was a writer, a starer out of windows, a speculator who spun novels, the student who explored the woods of the imagination that the others could not see. I was charged with not paying attention because I was paying such intense attention to those events within me that insisted upon examination. The writer is not interested in answers, but questions; not thoughts, but what might be thought. And so the writer messes around, toys with other ideas, seeks what is uncomfortable, strange, unexpected, traitorous (p.27).

Understanding that writing is "putting thoughts into words", it becomes more than a language arts curriculum that teaches the conventions of language. Writing in the schools becomes the discipline where children begin to get in touch with their personal schema, where they begin to realize the power of their own ideas and opinions; where they realize that what humans have in common with each other is more important than the differences.

The collective message created by the writers encompassed in the literary review is both political and educational. Harste (1989), in response to the results of the National Assessment of Education Progress asserted the results proved that we get what we teach; students do well on items that test low-level reading skills and recall, but less well on critical thinking and the ability to solve

problems. He contends that we produce fewer writers than any other literate nation. To separate education from the political domain is not reality, as it is through the education institutions that the political doctrines are first taught. If our society is to become a multicultural society based on tolerance and celebration of diversity, the foundations will be laid down in the schools.

GOALS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

The intent of the handbook is to encourage teachers to develop a holistic perspective of teaching, students, and, most specifically, a writing curriculum. As whole language is the reading and writing model that most closely fulfills the principles of holistic education, it is the model alluded to in the handbook. Because of the many misrepresentations of the whole language philosophy leading to an erroneous understanding of the philosophy and to a resistance to learning about it, the term "whole language" will not be used in the handbook.

Becoming a whole language teacher is a process that evolves with observing how children learn, what simplifies learning, and gradually laying aside conventional views of teaching. A tenet of whole language philosophy is that if learning is meaningful and relevant to the learner's life, then it will be motivating. If teachers are passionate about students developing individual voice as they write about their ideas, cultures and perspectives, then students will care about what they write and may want to share their writing with their peers. As students share their writing, teachers will come to know what each student cares most deeply about and will help them validate those feelings.

Understanding that the development of a writer begins with play and oral language and continues through the whole spectrum of literacy with conventions, grammar, and spelling

becoming meaningful toward the end of the process, requires teachers to reflect on their own writing histories and to change their perception of a writing curriculum.

The challenge for teachers is to effect change in society by empowering students. Students in our culture are angry because they are disenfranchised and devalued as persons. Their teachers are in positions where they can change the attitudes of these students through positive classroom experiences. A goal of the handbook is to bring to an awareness level for teachers the possibility of using writing to change how students see their place in our society.

Respect for the individual child, which encompasses their culture, race, learning style, and schema, is the foundation teachers can use to win the trust and confidence of their students. When teachers see their students as individuals and not just part of a group called a "class", they begin to see new possibilities for teaching. Sizer (1994) mentions the disrespect in our society toward students resulting in violence.

A discussion in the handbook on learning environments will help teachers establish nurturing and safe classrooms so students will risk sharing their deepest, most intense selves. As the teachers model celebration of diversity, the students will experience connecting with others of diverse perspectives as they write and share writing.

The handbook will be an invitation to visit a classroom where the definition of writing differs from the conventional notion. Included are examples of students writing on topics they have chosen, interacting with each other as they work through the process of getting thoughts down on paper, and using writing for authentic purposes.

Teachers who see their perceived rights as the keepers of knowledge, indoctrinators of youth, and guardians of control, will reject the call to empower their students. They will see this empowerment as diminishing their own role. Teachers who are biased toward students based on racial, ethnic, and cultural differences will have limited reception of the idea that students have the ability, the knowledge, or the right to express themselves freely as they write.

The teachers' personal attitudes toward learning, teaching and their role in the classroom, will influence how comfortable they are with the principles of whole language philosophy that will be an integral element of the handbook. Those teachers who welcome the role of facilitator and fellow-learner in the learning process, will accept the challenge of developing child-centered classrooms and endeavoring to cultivate community in the classroom, will value and support the ideas presented in the handbook. Those teachers who resist the idea of giving up control of learning, control of the curriculum, and control of their

students' thinking, will find ideas to consider in the handbook.

The handbook is not meant to be a censure of teachers or curriculum, but a source of ideas for experimenting in the classroom. Hopefully it will be thought-provoking for teachers looking for effective ways to help their students develop as writers who value what they and others have to say.

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APPENDIX

THIS TOO IS WRITING

by Iris Anne Tramp

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

"The more children read, the more they learn about reading and writing, and the more they write, the more they learn about writing and reading."

(Heidi Mills, 1990, p. xxiii)

"I wish we could change the world by creating powerful writers for forever instead of just indifferent writers for school."

(Mem Fox, 1992, p. 54)

"If we can unteach ourselves the attitudes and methods which exclude so many from writing then students who do not believe they can write will begin to produce writers' texts, full of error, confusion, clumsiness, underdevelopment, voice and possibility."

(Donald Murray, 1990, pp.30)

I hope that in reading this book you will find some new ideas to try in your classroom; will find food for thought about the political implications of children writing; will find more freedom yourself as you facilitate your students' progress in writing. It is interesting to reflect back on your own writing history. What do you remember about your writing lessons in school? Was your teacher interested in what you wrote or more interested in your penmanship, spelling, and grammar? Did you ever have time to share your

writing with other students and hear or read what they wrote? Did you enjoy writing? Refelcting in this way can help you empathize with your students and make writing more meaningful for them.

Look at the students in your classroom. Do you have culturally different children, children whose primary language is other than English, children whose way of processing information differs from the norm, children who are transient? These children have special needs that must be considered if they are to succeed in writing.

In response to concern about how poorly students are doing in writing after they leave secondary schools, teachers are working hard at teaching students to write. In many schools you find students writing journal entries in response to a prompt; students getting experience in writing in the different genre; students writing and publishing books for Young Authors' Conferences; students writing in response to literature they have read.

In my classroom portrayed in the book, students make lists as they play; tell stories about themselves and their families; write notes to me and each other; have experiences in alternate communication systems.....this too is writing. In writing this handbook, my desire is that you, as a teacher, will be motivated to change the way you view students and teaching, particularly the teaching of writing.

Understanding the underlying process involved in

writing, the purposes for writing, how children learn, how to design learning environments and situations that are compatible with what we know about the functions of the brain - all these elements are as important as being skillful in teaching the conventions of language. There is a time for teaching these skills and this will also be addressed.

The political and social issues of writing become more relevant as our society is increasingly multi-cultural and diverse. Students need to care about who they are and value their own ideas, cultures, perspectives and to share these in writing. As classroom communities, you and your students can develop visions and celebrate your diversities. If you are passionate about what students write instead of how they write, students will be encouraged to take the risks eloquent writers take.

The needs of the students will be dealt with: to talk while they write, to play while they write, to have a reason to write, to make sense of their world as they write, to feel safe from criticism and pressure to succeed in writing, to interact with others as they write. As your students listen and respond with caring when other students share that which is important to them, they gain the freedom to enter into dialogue that leads to decision-making in which presently only a chosen few participate.

The majority of people are not allowed to write. Some

> are censored by those authorities who fear the power of people writing. These authorities are not just in other societies on other continents, they exist in Washington, in state capitols, on school boards, in school administrations, in agencies, in churches, in corporations, in classrooms, in communities, in families. We censor ourselves and others by fear of what may be said and we censor by not believing that those not like us have anything worth saying and the language with which to say it. Those who come from another class in our very highly classed society, those who think or feel or behave or know differently, are not encouraged to write. They are not taught. They are not believed and they are not listened to. We confirm their lack of faith in themselves and we, as well as they, suffer (Murray, 1990, p.30).

I have attempted to address these issues by sharing personal classroom experiences. The children in my classrooms were elementary students, K through sixth grade, from diverse, multi-cultural backgrounds; within the population of their elementary school, twenty-four languages were represented.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

"A literacy rich classroom is partly like a children's bookstore, partly like an office, and partly like a theater."

(Barron, 1990, p. 21)

A classroom that is rich in print, rich in opportunities for exploration, and rich in providing opportunities for children to play and talk, is a classroom that promotes writing. The physical arrangement of your classroom can encourage opportunities for both collaboration and independent activities. Classrooms that are arranged into learning centers invite the students to be active participants in their learning and improves their social interaction.

In setting up the classroom, I consider that I will be in that room at least six hours a day, five days a week for a year. When the children walk into the classroom for the first time, I want them to feel that this is a place designed for them. I have lace curtains on the windows, a brass floor lamp by a comfortable, cushioned rocking chair, a few small chairs and tables for those students who prefer a formal place to sit, and big cushions on the carpeted floor for the informal learners. Children enjoy nooks and crannies where they can curl up with a book to read or

notebook for writing.

When children view the classroom as "their" room and enjoy working in that room, behavior problems are minimal. Control of children in the classroom is always an issue, but children are not our adversaries - I have yet to have a student that did not want to please me. Just this fact alon gives you remarkable power and control over children.

Once I realized that my primary function in the classroom was facilitator of learning and not an agent of control, teaching became a lot more enjoyable. When students see you as being there to help them when they need help, to prived materials to facilitate learning, and one who is also learning, then behavior is not an issue.

Children need places to organize and keep their work. Three-ring binders, in which to keep their ongoing writing projects, work best for my students. It is vital to develop a system for the children to organize their work that they can use and maintain independently. The students each have a small cubby or tub for their personal things. Having all student supplies located for ease of access fosters student independence.

As reading and writing cannot be separated because the development of one supports the development of the other, a wealth of reading material are a prominent component of my classroom. Magazines, lists, signs, messages, books, poetry, fiction, fairy tales, catalogues, posters provide

models of writing.

Knowing that choice is an important factor in brain compatible learning, I have library books displayed so the front of the book can be seen as children initially choose books from the pictures (eight foot sections of rain gutter fastened to the wall, one above the other, make excellent racks for displaying picture books). I provide as many listening centers as I can rummage up (tape players with headsets) and an abundance of books and tapes so children have a choice of listening materials.

Another critical element in the classroom is a well-equipped writing center with a variety of writing tools and assortment of writing paper. Look at your own work area at school or at home and notice what items you need to support you as you write; children need many of the same items in the classroom writing center.

To validate the students as authors it is important to provide several areas in the classroom for sharing and displaying student writing. Student-authored books are processed into the classroom and school library for check-out by other students and bulletin boards encourage participatory writing as message boards and classroom calendars. Chart paper is placed around the classroom as evolving word banks which the children are free to add to as they wish.

PLAY AND WRITING

"Games are not to be considered as haphazard ideas of parents or educators but, as educational aids and as stimuli for the spirit, for the fantasy, and for the life-technique of the child."

(Adler, 1927 p. 101)

"Creativity was in each one of us as a small child. In children it is universal. Among adults it is almost non-existent. The great question is, what has happened to this enormous and universal human capacity? That is the question of the age."

(Tillie Olson, 1978, p.261)

My classroom: The primary children used the playhouse area with great enthusiasm. The weekly grocery special ad were especially popular as the children wrote out their grocery lists each week. One day a group of them came to me and lodged a protest. They had decided it was a waste of time to make out shopping lists when we did not have grocery market in the classroom where they could take their lists and shop. We cleared another corner (it is amazing how many corners can be found in a classroom!), set up more shelves and we all worked at stocking the shelves with empty food boxes, cans, plastic fruit, etc. We had a grocery store!

An ideal learning situation is one where the children

feel as if they are playing, but important concepts are being learned. When children are playing, they are really coping with the tasks of life by role playing, fantasizing, and experimenting with their environment. The energy, creativity, and enthusiasm that children put into their games can be captured for the classroom if the we design the learning situations so they resemble play situations.

Establishing play areas that are dramatic settings including props that encourage children to write, we design learning situations that tap into their natural inclination to pretend, to mimic, to dramatize. It is interesting to us as teachers to consider the importance of play as it is through playing children assimilate new information and consolidate it with experience.

Researchers note that writing is the most popular beginning reading activity. A corner set up as a play house with a pad of paper by the telephone to write down phone messages; grocery ads from the newspaper with pads of paper for writing the grocery list; boxes of stationary, thank you notes, greeting cards, pencils, and stamps to carry out family-like correspondence; a small black board for "family" to leave notes- all these props have children writing in a natural way, mimicking how they have seen adults write.

The drama-play center should be changed before the children tire of it and another set up with different props. For example: doctor's office, newspaper office, library,

grocery store, flower shop, candy store, car repair shop, toy store, restaurant, fast food stop where you order from your car, any setting that is familiar to children and encourages writing in the context of play or pretending. By entering into play with the children when the new area is introduced, you can serve as a model for using the props provided.

Teachers who have used the play approach to writing have observed the students drawing, scribbling, tracing, copying, dictating, writing on a computer or typewriter, writing related to thematic play, storing writing, and writing using invented writing forms. Research has found that children who play at reading and writing ultimately produce higher scores on standardized achievement tests (Pellegrini, 1980).

CONTENT AREA WRITING

"Purposeless activities in language arts are probably the burial ground of language development, and coffins can be found in most classrooms."

(Mem Fox, 1992, p. 42)

"If we listen well, our youngsters will invite us to share a world and ways of living in that world."

(Calkins, 1990, p. 1)

My classroom: Journal writing. Everyone talks about children writing in journals in school now. In some school districts journal writing is no longer allowed because parents are so threatened by what their children might write in their journals. At the other end of the scale, there is concern that students will not write anything in their journals-hence the journal prompt. When I first started journal writing for students I had pages and pages of writing prompts but, the results were only half-hearted.

When I started response or dialogue journals with the children they responded with enthusiasm. The children ask me questions in their journals or write about anything they chose. The children ask me questions about my family, my home, my childhood, my hobbies. I retain the right to not answer by saying "that question is too personal." When I respond by writing in their journals, I ask them questions

also. A written conversation develops between the students and myself. Having as many as thirty-five students in a classroom makes it difficult to see them as individuals and dialogue journals are a way to get to know your students better.

The students are divided into five journal groups and one group each day leaves their journals on my desk (if they want me to respond). This means I am responding to only five or six journals each day. Occasionally, a parent will ask to see their child's journal; they are told that only the student can share the journal with them. The amount students write in their journals increased substantially when they knew they had an audience. Conversational journals are an effective way to help students develop personal voice by sharing their ideas in writing.

My classroom: The children loved watching the cheery zebra finches in their cage sitting on a table in the classroom. The finches were "child-oriented", too. When a child would sit down next to the cage to watch the birds, the birds would move as close to the child as the cage allowed. Interest reached a new high when the mother bird began laying eggs in the nesting basket.

I suggested they begin keeping a daily diary about the birds in their science logs. They wrote about the struggle the finches went through to have a family. Many days the children found broken eggs in the bottom of the cage. They

drew pictures in their science logs and wrote speculatively about what was happening. When the mother bird began sitting on the nest, the children were eager to watch and write each day. The day they came to school and found new baby birds in the nesting basket was an epic occasion!

Much sharing of what they wrote in their logs took place during this time. When the children asked if we could write a book about the finches and their babies, I suggested that they continue to observe and write about the finch family until the babies left to go to new home. At the time the baby birds were adopted by other teachers and went to their new classrooms, we sat down as a group and shared what the children had written in their science logs about the finch family.

After they worked in groups on writing the text for the book, we continued to work together until an agreed upon text had been developed. I typed the text and distributed the pages to the children to illustrate. The books were then bound and put into the class library and school library.

The children also kept a running diary of fish tank happenings in their science log. These read like grim, fatalistic sagas as our fish ate each other, died for various reasons, and just plain disappeared! We always put the dead fish out under the tree by our door and the children were soon referring to this in their logs as the

"fish tree".

As the children wrote in their science logs, they drew pictures, talked with each other, and kept a record they could refer back to. The only questions asked were those they generated. Their learning was facilitated by observing, interacting with others about those observations to validate what they saw. Relevant books were placed in the science center and time to observe, interact, and write was provided. When the children were writing about the pets in our classroom, they were using the scientific process of observing, recording, and deducing. They were involved in real life, complex events.

ALTERNATE COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

"How we feel about a thing is equal in importance to how we think about it. And the only difference between us and our children in this respect is that they don't have as extensive a vocabulary to express how they feel and think.

(Thomas Sly, 1991, p. 53)

"Although we have the same set of systems, including our senses and basic emotions, they are integrated differently in every brain."

(Caine & Caine, 1991, p. 87)

My classroom: It was another September day after lunch, hot in the way it can be in Southern California. Several children were clamoring at me, trying to tell me about something that happened on the playground. Two children were crying and a few others were staying suspiciously on the fringe of the class.

I reminded the children that they could write me notes about what happened and we would take it up later in a class meeting. It was obvious that this was a less than satisfactory response. The children had not been using this form of communication much, as is common early in the school year. I gave the "quiet" signal and told them to sit quietly in a circle on the floor. I asked the children

involved to go to the back of the room and plan how they could show the rest of us what happened on the playground. While these children busily and at times noisily discussed how to "dramatize" their story for us, I read some books to the rest of the class, keeping the weeping children next to me.

Finally, the group indicated they were ready to show us what happened. It was a rough, unrehearsed dramatization of a game started in fun which deteriorated into a shoving match. Through the dramatization, we discovered which students went beyond the boundaries of play. All of the children felt they had a turn at telling their side of the story. We discussed how to prevent playtime from becoming not fun the next time they went to the playground.

Through such dramatization activities, the children were learning to express themselves. As most young children are kinesthetic and can use their bodies well to express themselves, this is one way of getting them to communicate. With time, these children began writing about their playground experiences. Remembering that there are several systems of communication, we can use the system that facilitates self-expression and build on that system to help children develop their ability to communicate through writing.

My classroom: If children like to draw, I use this communication system to help them break the code of

language. It is not unusual to find that children who are having difficulty learning to read and write are unusually artistic. These are the children I ask to "draw me a story." After they have completed their drawing, I ask them to tell me about the story they drew. I write the story down as they tell me and later type it for them. I write the story with them watching me as another opportunity to model writing for them. Using children's own text is often the needed tool to break through their inability to read.

In conventional schools, when children have difficulty learning they are perceived as deficient in some way or at the least having a problem. This is usually because the teacher knows one way of teaching and if that does not work, then there must be something the matter with the children. When you look at the "whole" child, some fascinating possibilities for helping children learn begin appearing.

When I think of the "whole" child, I consider their individual learning style, cultural background, developmental stage, personality, and interests. What is learned is influenced by emotions and mind sets based on expectancy, personal bias and prejudice, degree of self-esteem, and the need for social interaction. Every aspect of students' lives, including community, family, and technology affects their learning (Hart, 1983).

Children need risk-free learning environments where they feel safe. Brain-compatible learning theory addresses

the impact of the emotions on learning. When students feel any threat associated with a learning task, the related stress causes a change in brain chemicals affecting their ability to learn. Because it is impossible to isolate the cognitive (thinking) from the affective (feeling) domain, we need to understand that students' feelings and attitudes will be involved in learning.

It is important to see each child as an individual and to facilitate that child's education without infringing on their individuality. Research on learning styles (Dunn, 1992) has revealed that because of biological factors, each person is affected differently by environmental elements: sound, light, temperature and design. We also have individual reactions to emotional elements: motivation, persistence, responsibility, and individual need for structure or choice. The sociological elements which come into play include preference to learn alone or with others.

There are also physical variables to consider: perceptual strengths, food intake, time of day or night, energy levels, and the need for mobility. All of these variables affect the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, absorb and retain new and difficult information. It is a challenge for us to develop curriculum and establish environments that meet the needs of all our students.

Providing experiences in the language arts program that

include drama, art, music, dance, and writing encompasses all the communication systems and provides learning opportunities for children in every modality. This kind of multifaceted teaching will accommodate the visual, tactile, emotional, and auditory preferences of individual children.

MAKING CONNECTIONS IN WRITING

"No one in real life fills in ditto-sheets. They are the cul-de-sacs and one-way streets of writing, in which there is no one waiting to receive the message at the end of the road, nor want to receive it, because it's pointless."

(Mem Fox, 1992, p. 73)

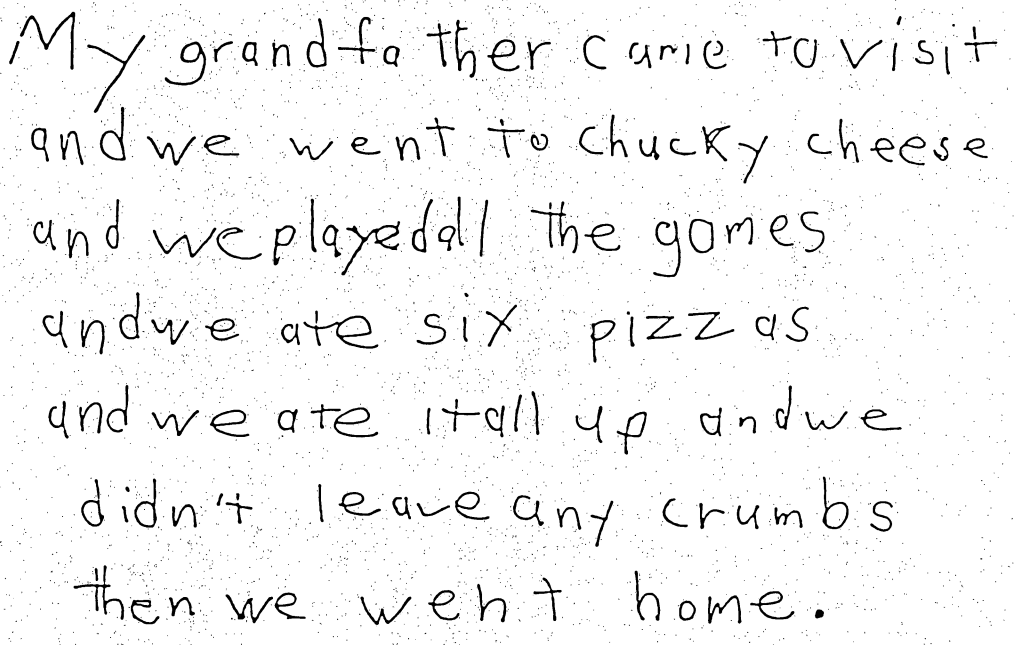
Using writing in the classroom as it is used in the real world helps children make connections between what they already know and what we are wanting to help them learn. Understanding that the brain functions best when learning is taught within context or in complex patterns explains why children do better with learning experiences that help them make connections. When students experience authentic writing which relates to their real world, about which they already have many brain patterns in place, connections are made which facilitate learning.

All children know their names when they start school. Having them "sign in" when they come into the classroom each morning is a good way to start them in writing as they are writing something they already know and have an emotional bond with. It also helps them to focus on their classmates names and in a short time they are reading the names of all the students in the classroom. A good start to reading.

The message board is a favorite gathering place in my

classroom. All of us write messages to the class, news items, directions how to play favorite games, recipes children think others would like, and jokes. This is the beginning of the children using writing to communicate. Victor thought his grandfather's visit was news worthy and posted it on the message board.

Victor, age 7



The classroom post office is heavily used. A fiber board shoe storage box with individual cubby holes has been converted to a post office. Each of us has a cubby as our mailbox and enjoy getting notes and letters from each other. If we have trouble reading a note we ask the writer to help us out. The students are encouraged to write notes to me about playground conflicts, giving me all the details. They

know that the notes will be read and the conflicts resolved during our daily class meeting. Homework assignments include the children writing notes to the parents and letters to grandparents.

The classroom newspaper is one of the children's favorite activities. We keep a box in the classroom where the children put any writing they want included in the newspaper. Once a month, a group of children and myself go through the box and decide what will be in our paper for the current month. The pieces to be included are xeroxed, reduced and fit into place on an 8 by 11 piece of paper. I type in headings and xerox the final copies. The published newspapers are popular with students and parents.

Another favorite writing activity is the Birthday Book. The birthdays of the month are posted on the message board and each child, in their free time, writing time, or at home, works on writing and illustrating a page for each child to go into the birthday child's book. As birthdays are happy celebrations, only positive happy pages are included.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

"Are our classrooms talking places? Are they, in fact, places where children learn to talk; learn through talk; and learn about talk?"

(John Dwyer, 1991, p. 3)

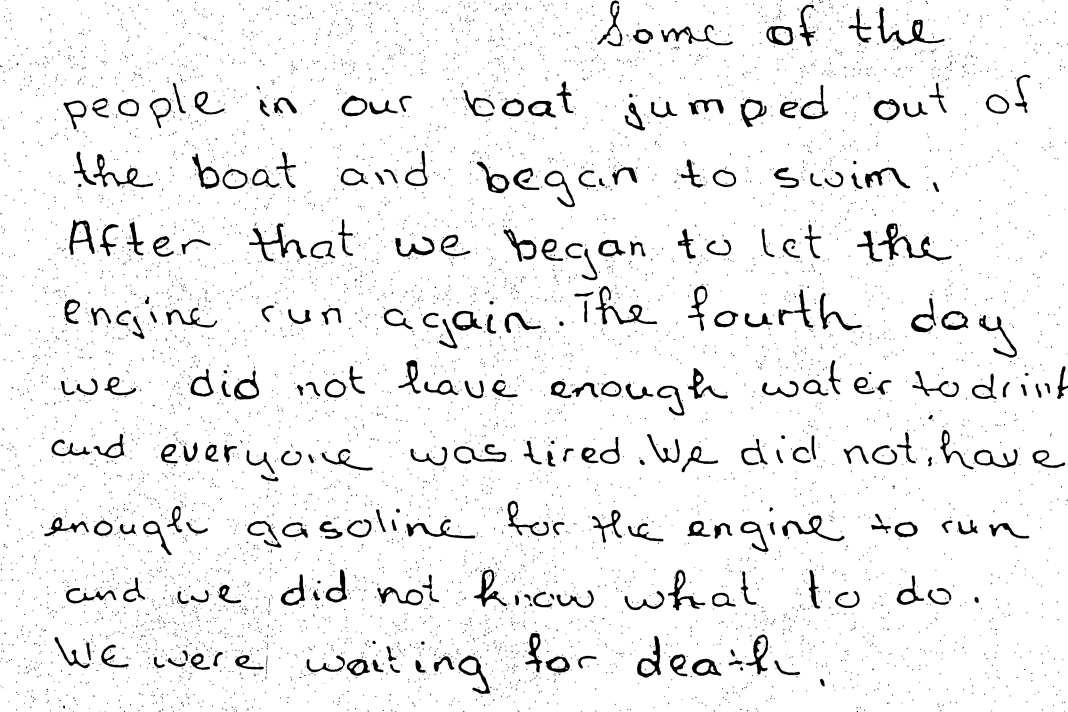
My classroom: This particular year I was working with fifth and sixth grade children. At this time we were having many children enter our school who were refugees from Southeast Asia. These were traumatized, frightened children who resisted working in collaborative groups. They had some command of English as it had been taught in the camps where they had spent many months. With a diverse student population, it was a challenge to encourage them to work together and yet a social imperative to build community in our classroom. We experienced a break-through when I read Cynthia Rylant's When I was young in the mountains. I had the children talk about the places they had lived (Cambodia, Viet Nam, Mexico, El Salvador, Columbia, Guatemala, New York, Los Angeles) and we located all these places on a large world map, connecting small pictures of each child to their former home with red yarn.

I asked them to make a list of all the things they could remember about living in their previous homes. As a homework assignment, they were to ask their parents to tell

them about things that happened to them before they were old enough to remember.

During the following days, the children started writing using the pattern "When I was young in....." and developed a memory on each page. Each day I had them get into groups of four and share what they had written. It was quite stirring to watch the children who had grown up in this country react to the sometimes appalling memories that some of the refugee children told so matter-of-factly.

Maikanh, age 11



As Maikanh read, "The fourth day we did not have enough water to drink and everyone was tired. We did not have enough gasoline for the engine to run and we did not know

what to do. We were waiting for death," the faces of the students were stunned. Maikanh was a child who often wept for no apparent reason in class.

Sandy told of her family trying to escape. They had tried once and been caught. She remembered running down a road and her "uncle lifting her over high black gate and running with her to the boat." Her mother, father, grandparents and brothers and sisters did not make it over the fence and were still in Viet Nam.

Sandy, age 10

We had to climb over a black gate to escape. There were ships waiting outside to help us to escape. The patrol was coming and my uncle jumped off the ship. They caught him anyway. The guards took the people on the ships to jail. They did not take me as I was too small.

This writing and sharing experience was the beginning of community building in this group of students. Several of their autobiographies were honored at the county writing

celebration that spring.

Dyson (1987) addresses the question of children talking in the classroom. The traditional view is that when children are talking, laughing, teasing, correcting, they are "off-task". She maintains that if children are given tasks worth talking about and the right to talk, their interactions contribute substantially to literacy development.

Writing is a political activity. Helping students to develop their own voice is giving them the freedom to validate their own thoughts, to celebrate their diversity, and to be proud of their racial, religious, and cultural heritage. When we look at the social profiles of our students which relfect the development of our multicultural society, we can see that promoting tolerance and celebrating diversity is a social imperative. By providing opportunities for students to write personal histories and get in touch with their own "voices", we facilitate community building by breaking down spurious racial, cultural, and ethnic barriers. A fundamental element in young writers generating voice is collaboration with their peers.

The need to guide our children into a gentler, more tolerant way of living with each other in our increasingly multi-cultural society can be addressed during writing collaboration. When children share their inner worlds of

ideas, thoughts, visions, and schema through conversations or writing with other children, they come to realize they are more alike than they are different and become culturally sensitive students.

As students work in collaboration with other young writers, they begin to realize the power of their own ideas. Through talking and writing about common experiences, students become a group cooperatively engrossed in deliberation. The power they gain through writing and interaction gives them greater control over their individual lives.

Collaboration during writing recognizes that writing is a social activity as it provides students with an audience whose opinion matters. Students help each other to accomplish tasks that often are considered "over their heads" and as students act as proof-readers for each other, they gain a greater command of the conventions of language.

CONVENTIONS OF LANGUAGE

"Children learn to speak by speaking, making mistakes and refining their language as they communicate, so they learn how to spell by writing, inventing spelling and refining their understanding of print."

(J. Richard Gentry, 1987, p. 27)

My classroom: Since discovering that only 28% of children are ready to learn before 10:00 A.M. (Dunn, 1992), I fill the early school hours with dramatic play, developmental physical education, and activities that engage the children. On this particular day, the children are gathered on the carpet around my rocking chair. One of their favorite activities is watching and helping me write a story. I use a metal stand with chart paper on it with several colored markers handy. I talk aloud as I write:

I think I will write about going to camp when I was a little girl....When I was about ten years old, I went to a camp many miles from my home. It was in the mountains of colorado in a place called the Black Forest. I had never been away from home before, but I didn't miss any of my family. There were so many of us in my house that I liked getting away. Ten girls were in each little cabin with one counselor. It was such fun eating in the big dining room which was in a big log lodge. I think I'll wait until tomorrow to write more of my story. Now let's see who can help me read it.

The children and I read the story together. When we come to the word "colorado", I say, "Oh, look. I need to use

a large "C" here because Colorado is the name of a state." I cross out the small "c" and make the correction. The children become very involved in my writing, even anticipating words that I am going to be writing next or further on in the story.

I deliberately make spelling and punctuation errors and then correct them as we read back through the story. I revise and edit, talking aloud as I work and asking the children's opinions. I work on the story for a week, adding new sections each day. By modeling writing in this way, I am demonstrating thinking, editing (teaching them the conventions of language in context), revising, and the possibility of working on the same text over time for the children. It is meaningful for the children to see that everyone goes through the same thinking processes when writing.

The children are encouraged to spell words the way they sound or feel in their mouths, but if they request, I put a word bank near the areas where they are working. Even with encouragement, there are some that get stuck in their writing and won't move on if they can not spell a word. To facilitate their writing, I write the word on small post-it notes that the children can stick on their papers while they are writing. There are pads of these small post-it notes around the room and the children will often ask the "spellers" in our room to give them a word.

As students learn to read and are provided with opportunities to read many books, they are "subliminally" exposed to the conventions of language. With patience on our part, as emerging writing begins to include those sounds they have heard and written, it becomes apparent children spontaneously figure out the conventions of writing. In their own way, they invent the rules of spelling and writing.

At some point in writing, writers become aware that to share their text with others they need to use the conventions of language. The astute teacher will be sensitive to when these "teachable moments" occur. The motivation to learn originates with the learner; when students demonstrate a need for a specific skill and then use it purposefully and independently, it becomes a useful strategy. Early experiences (message boards, classroom post office, etc.) using writing to communicate with others brings the need for the conventions of language to the attention of the children.

Initially, children write for themselves. When they discover it is difficult to read someone else's note or the other person is having problems reading what they have written, awareness of the need for the conventions of language is raised, providing opportune times for you to give examples of ways to write that makes it easier for others to read our writing.

One of the most difficult things for you to do is to allow students to learn the conventions of language by reading and writing, but language skills taught out of context or in isolation from the text, remain just that....skills. Students who are over-concerned with spelling, penmanship, and punctuation need your help if they are to get beyond the mechanics of writing and write!

"Allowing children the freedom to take risks in their own writing is the best technique I know of. Children learn to speak by speaking, making mistakes and refining their language as they communicate. So they learn how to spell by writing, inventing spellings, and refining their understanding of print." (Richard Gentry, 1987, p. 27)

EVALUATION

"You are evaluating whenever you are observing, interacting with, and analyzing students."

(Yetta Goodman, 1989, p. 8)

Evaluating my students helps me broaden my knowledge base to better meet their needs. I am always observing and interacting with students to discover not only "what" but "how" they are learning. I am constantly gathering information that helps me make decisions about future instruction. I keep tabs on how groups are progressing and examine individual student work often, sharing what I learn with the students so they can judge how they are doing for themselves (Newman, 1990). Self-evaluation for the students involves them in questioning: How am I doing? Are things going as I planned? What can I do to see that things go better next time?

Formal evaluation is also needed to provide support for you in conferences with parents and administrators. In selecting evaluation instruments, consider your intention: to provide insights into how children learn and develop as writers; determine how much the writing is using available cues; avoiding over-reliance on standardized tests; tool for curriculum planning; to identify specific, repetitive problems; construct a profile of a writer's strategies,

patterns of strengths or problems.

I find Kucer's (1988) Instrument for the Observation and Evaluation of Basic Reading and Writing Process a useful instrument. It lists fifteen basic literacy processes and was developed to assess students' development of reading and writing. When used in a variety of language experiences over time, patterns of reading and writing behavior will emerge which can assist the you in addressing individual needs. The writing analysis gives the you information about what to look for in assessing children's writing. The guidelines provided take the randomness and guess-work out of the assessment process.

The Functional Spelling Inventory, developed by Katherine Busch (1990), reveals useful information about the processes your students use to spell words. It identifies nine spelling strategies within the classifications of phoneme/grapheme, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Linguistic analysis involves charting each functionally spelled word and deciding which of the nine strategies or combination of strategies the student uses in spelling. Analysis of the strategies students use when spelling functionally is pertinent and relevant for working with emergent readers/writers as it will help you plan your language arts curriculum.

Using the spelling inventory intermittently allows you to trace children's language development and provides you

with a method of documentation of a child's spelling progress which supports you when you interact with parents.

The most authentic assessment you can use in your classroom is the portfolio. Collecting student work from the first day of school and keeping it in individual student folders is the basic idea of a portfolio. Student portfolios provide an easy way to encourage student self-evaluation and provide a way for you to show accountability to your site administrator. This is a concrete assessment system you can share with parents to show student progress - a good way to emphasis that progress is what evaluation is all about.

IN CONCLUSION

"A good teacher writes lesson plans in pencil."

(Heidi Mills, 1990, p. 3)

"I often find that activities I plan are not as successful as I had hoped they would be, but I am coming to realize that when ideas do fall short of expectations, it is often because the ideas are mine rather than the children's."

(Timothy O'Keefe, 1990, p. 91)

Becoming a teacher is a process. When I reflect on the teacher I was at the beginning of my teaching career, I am amused; I didn't dream how much there was still to learn or how many, many years I would spend developing my craft through experimentation and study. I know now that I will continue to find "pieces of the puzzle" that is education.

The children are the key to the puzzle and yet, they keep changing on me! When I write about the imperative to address the individuality of children, it is because they are so eclectic and, in consequence, their learning needs are so diverse. I say this not in complaint for I would have it no other way; their diversity is what intrigues me and keeps me searching for new approaches. I sincerely believe there are few learning disabilities, only teaching

disabilities. I am convinced that if I can only understand the children better, I can find a way to help them learn inspite of their divergencies. The challenge to help all children develop voice, to respect their cultures, races, and to celebrate and welcome diversity keeps me poised for those moments in time when I can orchestrate a learning situation that validates children.

Before we can offer our students the gift of freedom, as teachers we must take the gift for ourselves. Many of us were educated in an era when freedom of thought and expression were myths. When we were learning to write, the emphasis was on correctness, not content. Our mandate was to conform not to develop and celebrate our individuality. Recognizing this, we can begin to give ourselves permission to get in touch with our own schema and become comfortable with our own voices. In the process, we will facilitate the development of our students as members of a true democracy.

Writing is only one of our communication systems, but it is the one that grants the most access to being heard in our culture. Writing is so much more than responding to a prompt, writing a story (do you know how <u>hard</u> it is to write a story?), cranking out reports whose subject has been selected by someone else, agonizing over spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Writing is feeling, sharing, daring to really think and express what we think, writing about something we are passionately interested in, questioning,

disagreeing, in short, writing is using language as an extension of ourselves and our thoughts.

I hope this small book will be meaningful to teachers who sense there is more to writing than the conventional curriculum provides. Indeed, there is no writing curriculum except the uses for writing that are found in the real world.

"Children are the living messages that we send to a time we will not see. They are a reflection of our culture."

Anonymous

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